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ABSTRACT

Advertising and society courses have suffered from conflicting educational goals, superficial scholarly research, and a lack of critical intellectual perspectives. The institutional perspective on advertising research has the major strength that it elucidates structural and functional factors of advertising. However, it ignores cultural understandings of advertising. Cultural analysis provides insight into the struggles of the social order which are behind current regulatory battles, public criticism, and practitioners' struggles which are based on the content of advertising (cultural values); it offers a useful perspective for discussing such current issues in advertising as professionalism and self-regulation; and it offers a way to discuss "social responsibility" in the light of the relationship between advertising and culture. Without a commitment to long-range scholarship, historical knowledge, sociological sensitivity, and "sociological imagination," however, cultural analysis can result in near-sighted intellectual vision merely affirming fashionable cultural values. (TJ)

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THE POLITICS AND PEDAGOGY OF ADVERTISING AND SOCIETY

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

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The study of advertising and society has a long history of second-rate status in academic programs. In fact, historically advertising academicians added non-vocational courses to curricula as an afterthought. The advertising and society course, like virtually all macro courses, largely served to legitimize the existence of vocationally oriented programs not to provide students with an intellectually solid and personally edifying education. In this brief paper I first point out a few of the major problems in developing intellectually respectable advertising and society courses. Next, I assess a few of the more promising approaches to advertising and society. Then I offer general guidelines for a cultural approach to the subject. Finally, in a cautionary note I suggest several pitfalls in the approach.

I.

Historically advertising practitioners and academicians have disagreed on the scope, function, and purpose of advertising education. Many practitioners continue to agree with Claude Hopkins' 1927 remark, "As far as advertising is concerned, one can learn more in one week's talk with farm folks than by a year in any classroom I know." Other practitioners believe that advertising education primarily should provide vocational training for aspiring young practitioners. Advertising academics are similarly divided, although current discussion suggests that the majority of college-

level teachers support either "last job" or "first job" vocational instruction; first job curricula focus on rudimentary skills such as layout and media buying; last job curricula stress management decision-making. Certainly most advertising programs espouse a mission of occupational preparation. Nevertheless, many advertising academicians correctly see the importance of providing advertising students with more than technical skills.

Partly to gain respectability within the academy and partly to enhance students' intellectual development, academicians initiated advertising and society courses in many advertising programs. Because academicians and practitioners often express contradictory views on advertisng education, however, the pedagogical purposes of these courses typically are unclear. Should these courses provide advertising majors with a technical understanding of laws and regulations? Should advertising and society courses critically examine the structure and function of the advertising industry in modern capitalism? Should they deal with current topical issues? These are important questions, and answers necessitate academicians' first dealing with advertising education's purpose, which historically has been fogged by the conflicting educational philosophies and ideologies of academicians and practitioners.

Advertising education has no intellectual home, which hinders the development of educational programs that are broader in scope

than vocationalism. The discipline's many academic labels stem from pre-World War I when zealous practitioners established advertising courses in Psychology, Journalism, English, and Business programs. Today advertising education continues to suffer from the disparate interests of Marketing, Communications, and Journalism programs. Not surprisingly, advertising courses often presume different ideological and educational assumptions that stem from the academic location of the curriculum and the interests of the instructor. The advertising and society course perhaps is more influenced by the lack of an intellectual home than are strictly vocational courses. In one department or college or school it becomes a course in economics; in another, consumerism; in yet another, advertising law.

Advertising and society courses also suffer from a dearth of scholarly advertising research. Historians and sociologists have produced few advertising studies, a surprising fact considering the ubiquity of modern consumer advertising. Although advertising academicians yearly write dozens of articles, the majority of this research is unusable in an advertising and society course for two major reasons. First, advertising research typically relies on inductive methodologies; studies usually focus on narrow problems and produce ungeneralizable conclusions. This dilemma is made worse by the publishing emphasis of many major universities; tenure requirements force academicians to publish short, quickly produced

articles and prohibit historical investigations, sociological examinations, or philosophical essays.

Second, advertising research is often of little use in the advertising and society course because it lacks a critical perspective. Most articles and surely the bulk of advertising textbooks are intellectually sterile; they presume the ideological and philosophical assumptions of the status quo, as a quick perusal of the "advertising and society" section of many of the major textbooks shows.[1]

The differing educational objectives and philosophies, the lack of an academic home, and the dearth of critical research and investigation hinder the development of intellectually respectable macro courses in advertising.

II.

Although few intellectuals have seriously investigated the rise of modern advertising, a number of excellent institutional studies have produced fertile groundwork for further analysis and discussion. Norris' 1965 address before the American Academy of Advertising perceptively linked modern advertising with late 19th century national advertisers' quest for distribution and price control. Carey's cogent interpretation of the importance of product information in the market system pointed out some of the

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philosophical assumptions underlying Western economic and political activities. Potter's insightful discussion of the relationship between modern advertising and American social values helped elucidate this country's fondness for material goods and commercial aspirations. And of course Sandage's institutional perspective depicted advertising as a necessary and benevolent means of persuading and informing individual citizens of proper resource allocation.[2]

As Rotzoll has shown, these four institutional perspectives posit certain assumptions about truth, society, and the nature of man, as well as offer differing definitions of the function of advertising.[3] Each assumes that advertising serves a major social or economic function in modern market economies. They offer fairly potent examination of the workings of advertising in the market system; they allow one to compare conflicting theories of the economic role of advertising and the social purpose of advertising regulation. For example, they point out that advertising laws stem from important political-economic developments; deceptive and corrective advertising laws rest on philosophical assumptions about how advertising operates in the market system. Indeed the "rationality" of man is currently being debated by advertising's critics and defenders. The institutional perspective shows that behind all criticisms and defenses of advertising lie particular

assumptions about advertising, the market system, and human nature.

In spite of these advantages, the institutional approach to advertising and society suffers from one major disadvantage. Although it highlights the philosophical positions of advertising's supporters and attackers, and although it elucidates advertising's possible broad societal and economic functions, it offers no means of cultural interpretation. In other words, the institutional approach emphasizes structural and functional factors at the expense of cultural understanding. Indeed institutionalism's power is also its weakness; purely deductive approaches emphasize generality to the neglect of specifics. Advertising not only serves to accomplish certain societal and economic ends; it also depicts ever-changing styles of life. Beyond their institutional function, whether it be market information, economic power, mass persuasion, or social inculcation, advertisements are literary expressions that dramatize contemporary life and interpret cultural styles.

It seems to me that we need an approach that begins with the assumption that communication is central in human affairs. Or, to put it more philosophically, we need to take seriously the concept of symbolism and the reality of human creativity. Man is much more than a functional being; he actively creates symbolic worlds of meaningful experiences. Advertising is one such world.

III.

A cultural approach to advertising would most effectively deal with advertising's sociological significance. Whereas the institutional approach attempts to explain advertising communication on the basis of societal functions, a cultural approach begins with a theory of society that is inherently a theory of communication. It assumes that society is created, maintained, and transformed in and through communication.[4] Advertisements, like all communication artifacts, are expressions of social realities; all consumer advertising affirms or challenges different social groups perceptions of reality. Advertisements are not viewed as neutral messages but as meaningful expressions of modern life-styles; they are cultural artifacts that bear witness to the preoccupations of a modern industrial society and consumer culture. Culturalism suggests that advertisements are interpretations of ways of life and that the scholar's job is one of interpreting these interpretations.

Cultural analysis thus provides a conducive atmosphere for openly discussing and assessing the modern literature of advertising. It leads to a host of interesting and provocative questions. For example, what are the values portrayed in various types of consumer advertising? What cultural myths--e.g. youthfulness and individualism--has advertising portrayed historically? How have these myths been stylistically expressed? How do these expressions relate to shifts in American social and cultural life? Which social groups do these advertisements support or challenge?

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The importance of cultural analysis in the study of advertising and society has generally been neglected. This is unfortunate since many contemporary attacks on advertising stem directly from cultural struggles in the social order. Various social groups view advertising as a threat to their perceptions of reality, morality, and life-style. In other words, the battle is not over the function of advertising, as the institutional perspective would suggest, but over the content of advertising.

Action for Children's Television is one current example of the importance of cultural conflict over the efficacy of modern consumer advertising. Although the organization's battleground is primarily legal, its mission is cultural. ACT uses legal channels to work for the legitimation of particular moral beliefs. In fact. ACT's activities are responses to shifts in the cultural fabric of American life. Its members, who are primarily housewives, view television advertising as symptomatic of the nation's moral decay. They associate the values portrayed in the mass media with the breakdown of the traditional family structure, the increased incidence of violence and crime, and the loosened sexual mores among young teens. Perhaps most interesting of all, ACT has translated these moral concerns into policy statements about advertising. ACT's supporters have increasingly relegated the cultural struggle between older, family-centered values and the more recent life styles portrayed in advertising to regulatory processes and legal decision-making.

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One more example might be helpful. Ralph Nader's ardent attacks on modern corporate practices are usually called "consumerism." Advocates argue that Nader's organization fights for the rights of American buyers. Institutional perspectives move the analysis a bit deep r by suggesting that Nader's organization, like all government and consumer groups, operates on the basis of a particular conception of the market system. Institutional investigators point out that Nader's view of the market is a blend of classical and neo liberalism; they show that Nader believes that increased government regulation will somehow enhance the effectiveness of the free market. They correctly see that Nader wants to limit the types of advertising information permitted in the market. At this point institutional analysis has about run its course.

Cultural analysis provides for more insight into Nader's organization particularly and consumerism generally. His organization, like most consumer groups today, maintain a religious faith in scientific research. They believe that courtrooms and committee hearings are the proper channels for advancing "consumer rights" and that scientific evidence must be marshalled to the cause. They further believe that science is on the side of consumers, when, in fact, it could easily be argued that science is on the side of the economic or political groups that have the most financial resources.

Thus, Nader's organization is not fundamentally a supporter of classical or neo liberal views of advertising and society. Rather, Nader represents modern society's boundless faith in the ameliorative value of scientific research and professional-legal expertise. Nader's professional style portrays a particular version of liberalism as the most viable expression of scientific righteousness. I need not point out that industry relies on the same scientific strategies to support its own, traditional view of the market. Consumerists and industry spokesmen bear striking similiarities when examined through a cultural perspective.

Cultural analysis' benefits are manifold. It provides insight into the struggles in the social order that lurk behind regulatory battles, public criticism, and practitioners' strategies. It also offers a useful perspective for discussing current issues in advertising, such as professionalism and self-regulation. What does "social responsibility" mean in light of the relationship between advertising and culture? And of course cultural analysis legitimately differentiates on the basis of content between various types of advertising; the old adage, "advertising is," can be put to rest since clearly industrial advertising, retail advertising, classified advertising, and general consumer goods advertising neither equally rely on practitioners' cultural strategies nor equally evoke regulatory action.

IV.

In spite of its potent interpretive powers, cultural analysis can result in near-sighted intellectual vision. Unlike simple data collecting or experimentalism, the cultural approach demands a commitment to long-range, qualitative scholarship. It requires what C. Wright Mills has called the "sociological imagination," a desire to intellectually pursue fundamental and difficult questions. Historical knowledge and sociological sensitivity are the main tools of the craft. Without a commitment to those ideals, cultural analysis becomes an exercise in affirming fashionable cultural values and downcasting unpopular stereotypes.

Cultural interpretation entails connecting advertising artifacts with particular social groups, time periods, and places. Demographics and psychographics are too sterile for use in cultural analysis; they conceptualize people according to "objective" variables that neglect meaningful cultural styles, tastes, and myths. And the deadly notion of "advertising effects" translates cultural interpretation into blinding empiricism. Cause-effect relationships between advertising and society will never be empirically proven because the questions asked by the researcher reflect his own politic., cultural, and economic assumptions. Cultural analysis is an interpretive methodology, not a device for proving the social effects of modern advertising.

Finally, the cultural approach to advertising and society helps us understand ourselves. When carried out in a serious and

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intellectual fashion, it allows advertising academics and researchers to look at their own preoccupations and assumptions. We can analyze the particular cultural trends that lead us to ask certain kinds of questions, carry out specific kinds of research, and teach various sorts of advertising and society courses. Hopefully this paper is one small step in that direction.

Footnotes

[1] One notable exception is Kim B. Rotzoll, James E. Haefner, and Charles H. Sandage, Advertising in Contemporary Society: Perspectives Toward Understanding (Columbus, Ohio: Grid, 1976).

[2] Vincent P. Norris, "Toward the Institutional Study of Advertising," Occasional Papers in Advertising, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 59-73, James W. Carey, "Advertising: An Institutional Approach," printed in C.H. Sandage and V. Fryburger, The Role of Advertising (Homewood, Illinois: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1960), pp. 3-17, David M. Potter, "The Institution of Abundance: Advertising," in his People of Plenty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), pp. 166-188, and Charles H. Sandage, "Some Institutional Aspects of Advertising," Journal of Advertising, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1973, pp. 6-9.

[3] See Rotzoll, Haefner, and Sandage.

[4] Aspects of a cultural approach to communication are discussed in James W. Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication," Communication, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 4-22.